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Section: U

TINSELTOWN SPYWITNESS

Elizabeth Snead and Jenny Peters

BEST IN SHOW: Nicole Kidman blew into Cannes this week for the Monday night premiere of her new film ``Dogville,'' directed by controversial filmmaker Lars von Trier.

The Danish director is renowned for his experimental filmmaking style (dubbed Dogma) and is known for pulling tremendous performances out of his actresses, at a high price. Emily Watson survived her brutally demanding role in his ``Breaking the Waves'' to win numerous awards and a big Hollywood career. But singer Bjork vowed never to act again after starring in his ``Dancer in the Dark.'' But hey, she did get to wear that swan dress to the Oscars!

Kidman, however, apparently gave as good as she got. In the film, set in the 1930s, she plays a seemingly fragile woman on the run from the mob, who tries to fit into a close-knit Rocky Mountain town.

``The first week was tricky,'' Kidman told press this week. ``(Von Trier) had preconceptions about me and I did about him. Then we went off into the forest and had a heart-to-heart. It was a three-hour, warts-and-all, screaming walk. But we came out with a very strong commitment to each other.''

Last year, at the Oscar nominees' luncheon in Beverly Hills, Kidman said that the Danish director wasn't too hard on her because she came to the film already emotionally drained. Shortly before filming began, her husband, Tom Cruise, left her to have an affair with actress Penelope Cruz. ``Lars told me he would not be too hard on me,'' Kidman said. ``He said, 'You are already broken.' ''

But looks like Nic has put herself back together again just fine, thanks very much. She looked sensational in a colorful Pucci dress and Bulgari jewelry at the Monday night premiere and already the buzz around Cannes is that she tops the short list for a best actress award, to be announced Sunday.

Not only that, but Cruz, who was in Cannes last week (notably without Cruise at her side) for the premiere of her poorly received French farce, ``Fanfan la Tulipe,'' left the packed port town for safer harbors before Kidman arrived.

According to reports in the British tab the Daily Mirror, the cost of flying

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Kidman to Cannes on a private jet and putting her up at a \$3,750-per-night hotel put the kibosh on Zoetropa's usual blowout bash. But hey, she's worth it.

IN THE FISHBOWL: Celebrities turned out in schools and brought their little fishes along for the swim up the ``Finding Nemo'' blue carpet spread out in front of the El Capitan theater Sunday afternoon.

The goal? To be the first to see the latest animated creation from Pixar, the makers of ``Toy Story'' and ``Monsters, Inc.'' The film's talented cast - including Ellen DeGeneres, Vicki Lewis, John Ratzenberger, Willem Dafoe, and child stars Alexander Gould and Erika Beck - arrived en masse. The stars all swam slowly up the carpet, while those with their children in tow - Brad Garrett, Elizabeth Perkins, director-writer Andrew Stanton, and Pixar head John Lassiter took even longer to make their way into the theater.

Kids were definitely the order of the day, as Cindy Crawford arrived with her young son, Presley, in tow. Lauren Holly, Thomas Gibson, James Marsden, Virginia Madsen, Miguel Ferrer and Rodney and Holly Robinson Peete, Kevin Smith and Michael Chiklis all brought their children to the festivities, too.

The premiere started off with a song, as singers took to the stage and performed favorites like ``You've Got a Friend in Me'' while surrounded by dancing characters like Woody, Buzz, Sully and Mike. Once ``Finding Nemo'' began, the kid-packed crowd quieted down and seemed positively mesmerized by the story about the adventures of a little lost clownfish.

2 photos

Photo:

(1) KIDMAN: Absolutely fetching.

Lionel Cironneau/Associated Press

(2) GOULD: ``Nemo'' is primo.

Steve Granitz/WireImage.com

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